

Read: Gen. 21:9-12

As our Torah reading opens, God remembers Sarah and she gives birth to a child, Isaac. As he begins to grow up, Sarah becomes increasingly unhappy by the presence of the concubine Hagar and her son Ishmael, Abraham's first born son. She demands that Abraham throw them out of the house. Abraham acquiesces. As they wander through the Negev, Hagar loses hope entirely and sits down, alone, to die.

This had happened once before, that Sarah mistreated Hagar and Hagar ran away. That time, though, an angel of God intercepted her and sent her back home, with the promise that she would give birth to a son to be called Ishmael, named such to indicate that God hears her cries, a son who would become a great nation. This time, God hears her cries and saves her and the boy, making of him a great nation – but they do not go back home to Abraham.

These stories acknowledge that sometimes, going back home is not always possible. We might long for the way things used to be, but it is not always within our power to recover the past. After six months of living with a pandemic, we understand that no matter how much we want things to be the way they used to be, we are stuck living in a very different present. The core message of Rosh Hashanah is that even if we cannot return to the past, we can make our way through the wilderness of the present towards a promising future.

Torah tells us not to lose hope! There is a better path than lying down to cry, giving up and waiting to die. It is a new year. Our tradition invokes the phrase *Hayom Harat Olam* to describe Rosh Hashanah, a phrase which evokes Jeremiah's sense that it would be better had his mother had been Harat Olam, eternally pregnant, and that he had never been born. Jeremiah might regret the arc of his life, but he grew up to become a prophet of Judea. We might wish the last six months never happened, but they did – and we have reached the new year and we stand this day in judgement because this day, in our chaotic, uncertain world, is a miracle. Hagar continued to exist, Ishmael grew up powerful and prosperous; we exist and this year can be our launching pad for doing and seeing wonderful things, engaging in powerful mitzvot.

The core message of this piece of Torah is that giving in to despair is not an acceptable option. The core message of Rosh Hashanah is that our lives have infinite value, even at those moments when they seem not worth living.

The Haftarah repeats this message. Hannah is miserable because her co-wife has children and she has none. She stops eating, she breaks down crying. The next year, she gave birth to a son. Our prayers are not necessarily answered so immediately and directly. We don't always get exactly what we want. Prayer is not a vending machine from which you can choose exactly which snack food will satisfy your craving. So at the end of the story, Hannah lends the child back to God. She has the humility and the gratitude to acknowledge that the gifts we enjoy don't really belong to us. They are ours only when we share them with others. And it is in *tzadakah*, acts of *gemilut hasadim*, acts of giving, that we can best chart a path through the wilderness of isolation and depression towards a joyful, hopeful, future pregnant with infinite possibility. *Hayom Harat Olam!* Today is pregnant with eternity! Rosh Hashanah insists that today holds the seeds of a promising future.

That's why no matter the obstacles and challenges, no matter the difficulties, Jewish communities gather, in person and virtually, to celebrate the New Year. In the words of the refrain of a Sephardi liturgical poem for Rosh Hashanah, *Tikhleh Shanah V'Kilelotiha, Tahel Shanah U'Birkhotiha*, May the old year and its curses be concluded, may the new year and its blessings begin!